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ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations between preschoolers' behavior in their family and a couple level index of parenting style. This index is defined as the difference in the amount of emotional interaction between mothers and fathers with their children. Thirty-eight families with a preschool-aged child took part in a laboratory visit, and mothers and fathers completed a questionnaire about their marriage. Laboratory ratings of the warmth, pleasure, coldness, and anger of parents' interactions with their child in dyadic sessions were used as an index of parenting style. The association of each of the four interaction variables to four other variables was examined. These variables were: (1) child behavior in a triadic family session; (2) marital conflict; (3) the emotional intensity of parents' interaction with their child during dyadic sessions; and (4) the difference in emotional intensity ratings of mothers' and fathers' interactions. Results demonstrated that couple differences in the intensity of their warmth, pleasure, and anger were related to children's decreased ability to concentrate on tasks. Results also indicated that couple differences in warmth were linked with greater amounts of negative affect expressed by children toward parents during family sessions. Seven references are cited. (Author/BC)

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**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MOTHERS' AND FATHERS' PARENTING STYLE:
THEIR EFFECT ON PRESCHOOLERS' BEHAVIOR IN THE FAMILY**

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ABSTRACT

Despite the pervasive belief that parents ought to be consistent (similar to each other) in their treatment of the child, the effects of consistency between parents have yet to be studied. This study examined the associations between preschoolers' behavior in their family and a couple level index of parenting style -- *differences in the amount of emotional interaction between mothers and fathers and their children*. Thirty-eight families with a preschool age child took part in a laboratory visit, and mothers and fathers completed a self-report questionnaire about their marriage. Laboratory ratings of the emotional intensity and valence of parents' interactions (warmth, pleasure, coldness, anger) with their child in dyadic sessions were used as an index of parenting style. Ratings of child behavior in a triadic family session were used as outcome measures.

For each of the four emotional interaction variables, a multiple regression analysis examined the associations among the following: marital conflict, the emotional intensity of mothers' and of fathers' interaction with their child during dyadic sessions, the difference between ratings of the emotional intensity of mothers' and fathers' interaction, and children's behavior in the family session. Results demonstrate that in many instances, differences in the amount of emotion mothers and fathers show toward their child was predictive of the quality of his/her behavior in the family *over and above* the parents' marital conflict and mothers' and fathers' individual parenting styles. Couple differences in the intensity of their positive affect and one form of their negative affect (anger) were related to children's decreased ability to concentrate on tasks, and couple differences in warmth were linked with greater amounts of negative affect expressed by children toward parents during family sessions. These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond parent-child dyads to incorporate family interactions in child socialization research.

INTRODUCTION

Children from intact families grow up in a setting that includes at least two other people, their mother and father. Research on the relationship between children's and parents' behavior has demonstrated a strong link between authoritative styles of parenting -- that is, those which combine warmth and responsiveness with structuring and limit-setting -- and children's adaptive socialization (e.g., Baumrind, 1979; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). However, as reviewers note, the majority of research on "parents'" role in the socialization process has focused either on the behavior of one parent (most often the mother) or on mothers' and fathers' separate dyadic interactions with their children. These reviewers have suggested that more complex models of parent-child interaction that incorporate information about the family system need to be adopted in child socialization research (see Clarke-Stewart, 1988; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). A more systemic perspective on the family environment would suggest that studies should not only examine individual parenting styles but also, for example, the ways in which couples work to be similar to each other in their treatment of their child.

The purpose of this study was to extend research on parenting styles and children's socialization beyond the examination of dyadic relationships and toward the inclusion of variables that give information about the couple--specifically, similarities or differences in the affective component of their parenting. Analyses examined the linkages between differences in the emotional intensity of mothers' and fathers' interactions (e.g., in the amount of warmth they show) with their child and that child's behavior when he or she interacts with both parents.

Research has yet to explore this issue of differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors, but some studies have examined parents' similarity in their attitudes about childrearing. Studies of parents' beliefs about childrearing have suggested that mothers and fathers who agree about childrearing practices are more likely to remain married (Block,

Block, & Morrisson, 1981) and tend to have authoritative parenting styles (Deal, Halverson, & Wampler, 1989). Block et al. (1981) also suggest linkages between parental agreement on childrearing and children's adaptive psychological functioning, whereas Deal et al. (1989) report that parental agreement on childrearing rarely explained children's behavior over and above mothers' and fathers' individual parenting styles. The degree to which parental attitudes toward childrearing and actual parenting behavior are related is uncertain, yet it is likely that those couples who agree about childrearing beliefs would tend to act more similarly as parents than those couples who do not agree about childrearing. Given this probable association between attitudes and behavior, the analyses of these data mirrored those of previous studies on agreement about childrearing. Analyses initially explored the relationships between couple differences in parenting behaviors and (1) reported marital conflict and (2) the individual parenting style of mothers and fathers. In addition, both marital conflict and individual parenting styles were controlled for in the analyses that attempted to examine the unique contribution of couple differences in parenting styles to children's behavior.

It was hypothesized that the valence of parents' emotional interactions with their children would be linked with children's behavior: positive interactions (warmth, pleasure) between parents and children would be associated with children's adaptive behaviors (lower negative affect and increased ability to focus on tasks), and negative interactions (coldness, anger) between parents and children would be linked with children's behavior that is less desirable (more negative affect and less concentration on tasks). Beyond this association, differences of any kind between the emotional intensity of a mother's and a father's interaction with his or her preschooler would be unsettling for the child. Couple differences in any type of parenting behavior would therefore be predictive of children who showed more negative affect and less task focus when interacting with both parents together.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-eight predominantly middle-class couples and their first born preschool-age children (19 girls & 19 boys; mean age=3 years, 9 months, s.d.=4.08 months) participated in this study. They were drawn from a larger sample of families involved in a longitudinal research project on the transition to parenthood. (See, e.g., Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garret, Coysh, Curtis-Boles, & Boles, 1985 for a detailed description of the sample and the design of the longitudinal study.)

Procedure

Following the parents' completion of a questionnaire about their marital relationship, the mother-child and father-child dyads and the mother-father-child triad each participated in separate 40 minute laboratory sessions that included structured "teaching" tasks and unstructured sandplay. A male-female team of trained clinicians observed all three sessions.

Measures

Marital conflict: Both husbands and wives responded to the Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). A portion of the items on this questionnaire specifically addressed the amount of conflict experienced on a range of topics related to couple life, e.g., finances and in-laws. These items were rated on a 6-point scale from "always disagree" to "always agree". Using the standardized scoring of these items, an index was calculated that represented the amount of marital conflict in the relationship (where lower scores corresponded to more marital conflict).

Emotional intensity of parents' interactions: At the conclusion of each parent-child laboratory session, global ratings of the parent's behavior were made by the clinicians. From this coding system, four variables describing the emotional intensity and valence of interactions were selected:

Positive interactions: --highest level of *warmth*: e.g., encouraging, reassuring of child

--highest level of *pleasure*: e.g., playful, enjoys interaction

Negative interactions: --highest level of *coldness*: e.g., aloof, no displays of affection

--highest level of *anger*: e.g., hostile, shows irritation

All variables were rated on a 5-point scale from "very low" to "excessive", except for anger which was rated on a 6-point scale from "none" to "excessive". Interrater reliability for these ratings ranged from .72 to .87 (calculated by Pearson product moment correlations). On each of the four variables, the score given by the female and the male raters were added together.

Couple differences in emotional intensity of interactions: A score was created for each couple that represented the degree to which their parenting styles on each of the four emotional interaction variables differed from each other, e.g., the extent to which they each showed different amounts of warmth with their child. The score was calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the husband's and wife's score on each variable. For example, if a husband's rating on pleasure was '7' and his wife's rating was '5', then the difference score would be '2', and if both husband and wife received a rating of '7' or if both received a rating of '3', the difference score would be '0'.

Child behavior in the family: Children's behavior in the triadic session was evaluated by the two experimenters using a 17 scale global rating system similar to that used for parenting style ratings. For items where the interrater reliability was at least .60, the ratings made by the male and female coder were added together. Z-scores of these items were calculated, and these scores were then subjected to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. The factor analysis of children's behavior resulted in three orthogonal factors, two of which -- *Task Orientation* (planfulness, persistence, attentiveness) and *Negative Affect* (anger, defiance, frustration) -- were used as outcome measures for the analyses. Interrater reliabilities for the scales averaged .78.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample on all of the independent variables (marital conflict, parents' emotional interactions, and couple differences in parenting). Overall, both mothers and fathers in this sample tended to show much warmth and pleasure in interactions with their child and showed little coldness or anger; however, there were differences in the ways husbands and wives in many families interacted with their child.

Couple Differences in Parenting and Parents' Relationship and Behavior

Couple differences in parenting were not strongly associated with either mothers' or fathers' reports of marital conflict (all r 's $< .20$). Couple differences in parenting behavior were related to the individual behavior of both mothers and fathers: Those parents in marriages in which spouses behaved differently from each other tended to show less positive affect and more negative affect as individuals than parents in marriages in which spouses displayed similar parenting behavior (see Table 2).

Couple Differences in Parenting and Child Behavior

Hierarchical step-wise multiple regression analyses that incorporated information about the marriage, individual parenting styles, and differences between parents' behavior were designed to attempt to explain children's family behavior. Initially information about the marital relationship (husbands' and wives' marital conflict) was entered (Step 1). This was followed by mothers' parenting (Step 2) and fathers' parenting (Step 3). Then the index of couple differences in parenting was entered as a predictor in the final step (Step 4). Separate analyses were performed for each of the four emotional interaction variables and each child outcome measure (task orientation and negative affect). Results of these analyses are shown in Tables 3 & 4.

Parents' positive interactions and children's negative affect: Children were more likely to express negative affect in the family session when either their mothers or their

fathers were less warm with them. However, over and above the links between parenting and child behavior, *couple differences in warmth expressed* ($R^2\Delta=.08$, $p < .06$) tended to be associated with *children displaying more negative affect* when they were with both parents (see Table 3).

Parents' positive interactions and children's task orientation: Children's increased ability to focus on tasks in the family session was related to fathers' greater expression of warmth and pleasure with them. But again, *couple differences in warmth* ($R^2\Delta=.24$, $p < .001$) and *pleasure* ($R^2\Delta=.11$, $p < .05$) were predictive of *significantly less concentration on tasks by children* independent of the variance accounted for by marital conflict and individual parenting styles (see Table 3).

Parents' negative interactions and children's negative affect: Children displayed more negative affect during the family session when their fathers showed coldness and when either their mothers or their fathers expressed anger. Couple differences in negative interactions did not explain any additional variance in children's negative affect.

Parents' negative interactions and children's task orientation: Children were less able to focus on tasks in the family session when their fathers exhibited more coldness and anger during dyadic interactions. Over and above this, *couple differences in anger* ($R^2\Delta=.08$, $p < .06$) tended to be predictive of *even lower amounts of concentration that children had for tasks* when he or she was playing with both parents (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

In this attempt to explore family influences on children's socialization, couple differences in parenting style were predictive of preschoolers' behavior independent of the variance accounted for by overall marital conflict and individual parenting styles of mothers and fathers. Consistent with previous research on parenting attitudes (Deal et al., 1989), the data from the present study suggest that when parents were similar to each other in their behavior, both mothers and fathers were more likely to show optimal parenting skills, with more

positive interactions and fewer negative interactions than parents in other families, and when mothers and fathers displayed different amounts of positive or negative interaction with their preschoolers, the parents were less likely to show optimal parenting styles. However, in contrast to Deal et al.(1989) and in confirmation of hypotheses, couple differences in the emotional intensity of interactions contributed unique information that helped explain children's behavior, above and beyond the independent contribution of individual parenting styles. As hypothesized, when significant, couple differences were associated with children's less adaptive behavior -- increased negative affect and decreased concentration on tasks -- when playing with both parents.

Couple differences were most consistently linked with preschoolers' ability to concentrate on tasks, and the findings were more consistent when differences in the intensity of positive interactions were examined. These results suggest that when preschoolers experience differences between their parents (especially in their warmth and pleasure with them), their ability to direct attention to duties outside the family interaction, i.e., completing prescribed tasks, is most compromised. Perhaps this pattern occurs because children even at this young age are struggling to understand or reconcile the differences between their parents' behavior with them and cannot direct their attention elsewhere.

These findings demonstrate that the relationship between parenting styles and preschoolers' behavior is more complex than previously described. The examination of familial variables is necessary in order to address this complexity. It may be that mothers' and fathers' behavior is linked directly with some types of children's behavior, such as emotional expressiveness, while it is more indirectly associated through the couple with other child outcomes, such as attention and concentration.

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Table 1. Means of marital conflict, ratings of emotional intensity of parents' interactions, and couple differences in interaction. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. (N=38)

	Mothers	Fathers	Couple Differences
MARITAL CONFLICT^a	35.51 (6.73)	34.49 (6.22)	
PARENTING STYLE			
<u>Positive interactions</u>			
Warmth	6.36 (1.19)	6.20 (1.05)	.72 (1.02)
Pleasure	6.10 (1.27)	6.10 (1.15)	.77 (0.87)
<u>Negative interactions</u>			
Coldness	1.82 (1.33)	1.92 (1.59)	1.03 (1.55)
Anger	3.00 (2.40)	2.74 (2.27)	1.90 (2.06)

^a Range from 20 to 46 where higher scores reflect less marital conflict.

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment correlations between couple differences in parenting style and individual interactions of mothers and fathers. (N=38)

PARENTS' INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR		
	Mothers' interaction with child	Fathers' interaction with child
COUPLE DIFFERENCES IN PARENTING STYLE		
<u>Positive interactions</u>		
Warmth	-.37**	-.65***
Pleasure	-.34*	-.33*
<u>Negative interactions</u>		
Coldness	.40**	.59***
Anger	.51***	.46***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3. Multiple regression analyses associating couple differences in positive interactions with their child and their child's behavior in the family. (N=38)

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR						
Negative Affect			Task Orientation			
	R ²	R ² Chg	β	R ²	R ² Chg	β
PARENTS' WARMTH						
<u>Step 1:</u> Marital Conflict (Mom)						
Marital Conflict (Dad)	.04	.04		.04	.04	
<u>Step 2:</u> Mother's Warmth	.12	.08 [#]	-	.07	.03	
<u>Step 3:</u> Father's Warmth	.26	.14 [*]	-	.26	.21***	+
<u>Step 4:</u> Couple Difference in Warmth	.34	.08 [#]	+	.50	.24***	-
PARENTS' PLEASURE						
<u>Step 1:</u> Marital Conflict (Mom)						
Marital Conflict (Dad)	.04	.04		.04	.04	
<u>Step 2:</u> Mother's Pleasure	.21	.17**	-	.06	.02	
<u>Step 3:</u> Father's Pleasure	.34	.13 [*]	-	.43	.37***	+
<u>Step 4:</u> Couple Difference in Pleasure	.36	.02		.54	.11 [*]	-

[#] p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 4. Multiple regression analyses associating couple differences in negative interactions with their child and their child's behavior in the family. (N=38)

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR							
		<u>Negative Affect</u>			<u>Task Orientation</u>		
		R ²	R ² Chg	B	R ²	R ² Chg	B
PARENTS' COLDNESS							
<u>Step 1:</u>	Marital Conflict (Mom)						
	Marital Conflict (Dad)	.04	.04		.04	.04	
<u>Step 2:</u>	Mother's Coldness	.11	.07 [#]	+	.06	.02	
<u>Step 3:</u>	Father's Coldness	.35	.24**	+	.56	.50***	-
<u>Step 4:</u>	Couple Difference in Coldness	.36	.01		.56	.00	
 PARENTS' ANGER							
<u>Step 1:</u>	Marital Conflict (Mom)						
	Marital Conflict (Dad)	.04	.04		.04	.04	
<u>Step 2:</u>	Mother's Anger	.18	.14*	+	.05	.01	
<u>Step 3:</u>	Father's Anger	.41	.23**	+	.25	.20**	-
<u>Step 4:</u>	Couple Difference in Anger	.41	.00		.33	.08 [#]	-

[#] p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001